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ABSTRACT

This report provides an introduction to the use of opinion surveys in gaining information about a school system in order to make decisions. The topics addressed are reasons for surveying, selecting the respondents, survey methods, selecting the survey sample, structuring the survey, writing the questions, training interviewers, pretesting the survey, analyzing the results, and reporting the results. This information should be helpful to a school administrator or school board member considering the use of an opinion survey. (Author)

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USING OPINION SURVEYS TO OBTAIN CITIZEN AND PARENT FEEDBACK ABOUT A SCHOOL SYSTEM

by

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EMDEC

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ABSTRACT

This report provides an introduction to the use of opinion surveys in gaining information about a school system in order to make decisions. The following topics are addressed:

(1) Reasons for surveying;

(2) Selecting the respondents;

(3) Survey methods;

(4) Selecting the survey sample;

(5) Structuring the survey;

(6) Writing the questions;

(7) Training interviewers;

(8) Pre-testing the survey;

(9) Analyzing the results; and

(10) Reporting the results.

This information should be helpful to a school administrator or school board member in the process of considering the use of an opinion survey.

Why Survey?

School boards and school administrators need current, accurate information in order to make decisions. In general, the information sources of school systems are not systematic. People with complaints are more likely to voice their opinions than those who are satisfied, two people with the same type of complaint may contact different people connected with the schools, and the same type of situation may cause one person to offer praise or criticism to the school district while another person might remain silent.

An opinion survey is one means of filling some of the communication needs of a school district. Two types of information can be collected:

(1) Attitudes about important community concerns; and

(2) Data on community understanding of school programs or community information sources about the schools.

In addition to information collection, a survey may be used to include board-based participation in decision-making. This is an especially important use in view of the new Pennsylvania Department of Education's Long-Range Planning guidelines which stress community involvement in the planning process.

Selecting the Respondents

While the major constituents of a school district are parents of school children or taxpayers, pupils and school employees are also possible target groups for opinion surveys. The group or groups selected depend(s) upon the reasons for the survey, i.e., taxpayers may be questioned concerning financial plans, parents surveyed about their satisfaction with school programs, or a wide range of people might be asked about a plan with wide impact such as year-round schools.

Survey Method

There are three methods of conducting surveys:

(1) Mail questionnaires;

(2) Telephone interviews; and

(3) Face-to-face interviews.

Table I summarizes the features of each of these survey methods.

TABLE I: CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY METHODS

METHODS	SURVEYING FACTORS: RESPONSE RATE	COST	POSSIBLE RESPONSE BIAS	OPPORTUNITY FOR PROBING
Mail	Low-Moderate	Moderate	Very low	Very little
Telephone	High	Expensive	Moderate	High
Face-to-face	High	Expensive	High	High

Each of these factors will vary in importance depending upon the purpose of the survey. The response rate is the percentage of people answering the survey questions out of the total number of people asked. A high response rate is important. For example, if only half of the people asked to respond to a survey do respond, the attitudes of these people may or may not be in accordance with the attitudes of those people not responding. Generally, if the response rate is less than 80%, it will be impossible to determine whether the results are representative of the population as a whole, or merely representative of those members interested enough to respond. Survey methods involving personal contact are more likely to get someone to respond to the questions, although return envelopes and follow-up contacts can increase response rates for mail questionnaires. Telephone and face-to-face interviews are naturally more expensive because they are labor intensive. Even if volunteers are used, they must still be trained to conduct interviews, and the use of volunteers may increase response bias.

Response bias refers to the degree to which a survey records a distortion rather than a person's "true opinion." It usually occurs because respondents to a survey try to answer questions the way they think the survey sponsor wants them to answer. For example, "Don't you think the school board is doing a good job?" is a biased question because it is slanted toward obtaining a positive response. In a face-to-face survey, the interviewer's facial expressions, verbal responses, etc. to the respondent's answer to one question could have a detrimental influence on later questions. That is, the respondent may form answers to please or displease the interviewer which, of course, results in a biased response. All but experienced interviewers, therefore, are likely to cause bias in a personal interview. Telephone surveys are less likely to have bias than face-to-face interviews. Written questionnaires are most likely to obtain candid, unbiased answers from respondents because they allow the respondent the greatest degree of anonymity.

The characterizations of each of these survey methods are generalizations. Any method will yield poor results if poorly carried out. For example, some mail surveys may have higher response rates than a telephone survey if interviewers call at inappropriate times; or a skilled interviewer in a face-to-face interview may get less biased answers than a poorly worded mail questionnaire.

Selecting the Survey Sample

In conducting opinion surveys, resource limitations usually dictate that only a portion of the total group of interest be polled. This is certainly the case where the parents or citizens of a school district are the respondent group. Drawing a sample from a larger population involves:

(a) identifying a population for which some information is sought;

(b) examining some members of the population; and

(c) extending the findings from the sample to the entire population.

It is therefore most important that the sample selected is representative of the whole group over a specified set of variables. Some of the variables which might be important in a school district survey of parents are:

(a) sex,

(b) age,

(c) number of children,

(d) years in school district,

(e) school attendance area,

(f) education level, and

(g) renting or owning a home.

Selecting a representative sample is facilitated by two activities:

(1) choosing the sample in such a manner that it is likely to be representative; and

(2) checking the sample to see if it is representative.

Choosing the sample by a systematic or random method increases the likelihood that it will be representative. For example, suppose that a school district wants to select 500 of 5000 households to respond to an opinion survey. One type of systematic sampling method would involve choosing every 10th household from a list of households. Unless there is a bias in the way households are arranged on the master list, this method should provide a representative sample. In this type of random sampling, each household has a 10% chance of being selected. A random number table or a computer could then be used to "decide" which 500 of the 5000 households should be selected.

Once the sample is chosen it can be compared to the whole group to see if it is representative with respect to the important variables. Statistical tests exist to determine whether the sample is within acceptable limits of the whole group on each variable.* Given a confidence level (usually 90% or 95%), these tests can be used to determine such questions as:

(a) Is the average number of children per family "the same" for the sample and the whole group?; and

(b) Is the proportion of households in Franklin School attendance area "the same" for the sample as for the whole group?

If there is confidence that the sample was selected so that it was representative, it may not be necessary to make the effort to test whether it is representative prior to conducting the survey. However, this test should be performed on the respondent group before releasing the survey results. If the respondent group is not representative on one or more important variables, then either the results must be corrected (by weighting the number of responses) or the bias (or biases) should be reported with the survey results. Recent census figures provide a means of checking several variables for parents or citizens.

A specialized form of random sampling, called a stratified random sample can be used to increase the likelihood of selecting a representative sample. In our previous example of selecting a sample of 500 from 5000 households, let us assume that there are five elementary school attendance areas, each with 1000 households. If school attendance area is an important variable for this survey, then a stratified sample would be selected by choosing 100 households from each of the five school attendance areas. In

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* The reader is referred to a statistics text for a discussion of these tests. For example, see Section 12.2, "Tests Concerning Means" and Section 12.4.1, "Tests Concerning Proportions" in Mathematical Statistics, John E. Freund, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962.

effect, the stratified method guarantees that the sample will be representative for each variable used in stratifying the sample.

Another specialized form of sampling which may be used involves the use of clusters. For example, blocks or census tracts could be used as clusters and a sample of households could be drawn from each cluster rather than from the school district as a whole. Each cluster is assured to be homogeneous, so that each element of the cluster is equivalent to any other element in that cluster. In the case of cluster sampling, special care should be exercised in checking the representativeness of the sample.

A natural question, once the survey results are compiled, is "How precisely does the sample reflect the opinions of the whole group?" Fortunately, the precision of a survey depends only upon the number of people responding and not the percentage of the population sampled, (assuming that the sample is representative). Table II provides estimates of the sampling error (or precision) for a question on an opinion survey.

TABLE II**

ALLOWANCE FOR SAMPLING ERROR

Survey Question	Number of People Responding						
	100	200	400	600	750	1000	1500
Answer % Near 10%, 90%	7	5	4	3	3	2	2
Answer % Near 20%, 80%	9	7	5	4	4	3	2
Answer % Near 30%, 70%	10*	8	6	4	4	4	3
Answer % Near 40%, 60%	11	8	6	5	4	4	3
Answer % Near 50%	11	8	6	5	4	4	3

**Adapted from Table 1, page 187, The Gallup Polls of Attitudes Toward Education.

The table would be used in the following manner: Let us say that 31% of a group of 100 respondents answered yes to a particular question. Therefore, since the answer percentage is near 30% and the number of respondents is 100, we look at the starred figure in the table. This means that the 31% obtained in the sample is subject to a 10% sampling error. Another way of stating this is that if the survey were repeated, 95 times out of 100*, the responses would be between 21% and 41% (31% ± 10%) answering yes to the same question.

Several research methods books which offer more detailed descriptions of survey sampling have been included in the bibliography of this report for the reader's reference.

Structuring the Survey

Once the general reasons for undertaking a survey have been outlined, specific questions have to be constructed. The first two steps are to decide on general topic areas and to set the approximate length of the survey. The following topic areas were used in one survey developed through EMDEC:

(1) School-Parent Communications;
(2) Educational Priorities and Problems;
(3) Neighborhood Schools;
(4) Staffing Policies;
(5) Individualized Instruction;
(6) School Programs;
(7) Food Service;
(8) Transportation; and
(9) Background Information About Respondents.

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* Table II is based on a .95 confidence level.

It is usually necessary to make some difficult decisions regarding the length of the questionnaire. That is, should the number of questions be increased in order to gain more information, or should the survey be abbreviated to increase the probability of a high response rate? In the particular case of a mail survey a lengthy questionnaire can significantly decrease the rate of response. Within the framework of the length of the survey, choices must also be made about the breadth (# major areas) versus the depth (# questions per major area) of the questionnaire. It should be remembered that future surveys can include new question areas or ask additional questions about a particular area.

Writing the Questions

The basic guideline for writing questions is to phrase them so that the answers received will be meaningful and easily interpreted. The following criteria offer more specific suggestions about developing survey questions:

(1) Avoid negative questions. Asking people if they feel "school district funds are spent unwisely" or if "Program A should be improved" will bias their answers. Generally, more accurate information can be obtained by either asking the question positively, i.e., "Are school district funds spent wisely?" or in a multiple choice framework with shades of difference in meaning, i.e., "Is Program A: (a) very effective, (b) somewhat effective, or (c) not effective?" However, there are exceptions to any general rule: for example, one school district has asked parents, "Are you getting enough information about the schools?" This district expects to get a significant number of "no" answers but they followed up with the question, "What kind of additional information would you like? With this information the school district will be able to improve their communication efforts.

(2) Don't assume knowledge. People may not know about a particular school district program. A few explanatory sentences may help to clarify a program. For example, one school district included this sentence in a question about individualized instruction: "Characteristics of individualized instruction include frequent assessment of a child's achievement, learning activities planned for each child as an individual, and flexible use of classroom space." This technique increases the chances that people who answer "don't know" to this question either are not familiar with individualized instruction or don't have an opinion, rather than merely confused by the term. Most people who were not familiar with the term "individualized instruction" may now be able to express their opinions realizing that their children are experiencing "individualized instruction" in their educational program.

(3) Avoid questions which can be answered without surveying. Asking people about their child's school attendance, or if they voted in the last election, adds unnecessary length to the survey because this information is available elsewhere.

(4) Avoid "iffy" questions. At best, people are poor predictors of their own behavior. (Today I feel that I would support a new bond issue, but a month from now standing in the voting booth I might not actually pull the lever.) At worst, people will try to "game" the question. (Since the district is asking me how much I'd pay for my child's lunch program, I'll answer 40¢ to influence the price, even though I'd pay 50¢ for this service.)

(5) Don't slant questions toward favorable answers. The survey should be aimed at getting honest answers from people so the school district can better satisfy its constituents. If the survey is designed to make the district "look good", the school system is only hurting itself.

(6) Don't use the survey as a sales program. Information about the value and extent of particular school programs is best transmitted as part of a regular communications or public relations program. Including this information in a survey will only bias respondent answers to the questions. The process of asking people their opinions about the schools is a very good public relations method in itself.

(7) Don't ask specific policy questions. Asking people about the school calendar, for example, may force the school district to either make a poor decision or act in opposition to public opinion. While one purpose of a survey is to estimate people's opinions about major issues, the survey should not ask about specific actions concerning these issues. Decision-makers in the school district are in a position where all factors, including cost, must be considered. Public opinion should be a major input into decisions, but the school board and school administration should not use the survey results to evade making their own decisions.

(8) Keep the questions simple. They should not be condescending but educational jargon should be avoided. It is easier for most laymen to think about a "lunch program" rather than a "food service" or about "reading, handwriting, grammar, and spelling" rather than "communications skills."

Training Interviewers

People must be trained for telephone or face-to-face interviewing in order to insure consistent and unbiased results from each interviewer. Even if an interviewer has previous survey experience, they will need to be trained to conduct the specific survey being used. The following guidelines should be used in conducting interviewer training sessions:*

1. Stress the importance of the interviewer's job. The interviewer directly affects the quantity and quality of the information received and therefore the value of the survey. Interviewers should know how they can affect survey results and why it is important to have unbiased results with a high response rate to insure reliability.

2. Convey items of specific knowledge about the job. Interviewers should know how many people they are to survey, when they should contact these people, how and when to turn in the responses, and what to do if a respondent declines the interview. The nature of the survey and how the sample was selected should also be reviewed. Interviewers will be better motivated and better prepared to do their job if they understand the purpose of the survey and the purpose of each individual question in the survey. Give the interviewers a specific deadline. Ten days to two weeks is a convenient deadline once assignments are made. Interviewers must have sufficient time to complete their interviews but too much time may result in procrastination and incomplete assignments.

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* A More complete discussion of this topic may be found in Appendix C (pp. 574-587), Research Methods in Social Relations (Revised Edition), Claire Selltiz, Marie Jahoda, Morton Deutsch, and Stuart Cook, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston), New York, 1959. Also see Chapter 9 (pp. 171-186), Survey Research Methods, Earl Babbie, Wadsworth Publishing Co., Belmont, California, 1973.

Guidelines about appearance and conduct of interviewers should also be stressed. Some suggested guidelines include:

"Dress to be neat and professional looking but do not overdress so as to make the respondent uncomfortable."

"Don't smoke without first asking if the respondent objects."

3. Explain the process of conducting an interview. The purpose of an interviewer is to create a situation in which the respondent's answers will be valid. In order to accomplish this purpose, interviewers must establish rapport with the respondent to put the respondent at ease, while maintaining a professional manner and securing the desired information. The introduction is a first step in creating the proper tone for the interview. One possible introduction is: "Hello, I'm _____ for the _____ Area School District. We would like to have your opinions about a number of important concerns of the schools. You have been selected at random to respond to this confidential survey." The interviewer should know the survey well enough that the interview can be carried on in a conversational setting. The interviewer should be able to pace the interview so that the respondent is neither rushed through the questions nor allowed to digress extensively from the questions. Transitional phrases included in the survey can assist the orderly completion of the survey. For example, "That completes the first section of the questionnaire. The next section will concentrate on school district priorities and problem areas. First, ..." Once the survey is completed, the interviewer should close the interview without rushing off or overstaying. An

effective means of handling this closing phase of the interview is to thank the respondent for their cooperation while making a leave-taking gesture such as putting the survey or survey notes in a folder or brief case. In the case of a telephone survey less rapport would have been developed between the respondent and interviewer, so a simple closing statement will suffice.

4. Prepare interviewers with quick and uniform responses to certain questions or situations. These likely events include such respondent remarks as:

"Why was I selected?"

"How do I know you represent the school district?"

"I'm too busy to answer."

"How long will this take?"

"What's this survey about?"

"Please repeat the question."

"What do you mean by (some term) ?"

Standard responses for these situations have been developed and are reviewed in many interviewing guides. These uniform methods of interviewer replies to such situations will usually result in the successful completion of the questionnaire. It is important that each interviewer know how much latitude they have in replying to respondent questions or uncertainty. "What do you mean by individualized instruction (or some other term)?" is an example of a common situation. Interviewers may be instructed to reply by only repeating the question or by trying to explain the term. The best method, generally, is to have a set of common definitions available to be used by each interviewer in such a situation.

5. Have the interviewers participate in at least one practice interview and observe at least one more. This increases the interviewer's confidence and offers an opportunity for observing the interviewers before they are conducting actual, field interviews. One method is to have the interviewers initially practice on each other. Then they may conduct a practice interview with one of the trainers who will role play and introduce some of the typical situations (see guideline 4, above) confronting interviewers. Videotaping is an especially effective means for reviewing an interviewer's practice interviews. In addition to training for standardization of questionning, training should also cover standardization of response recording. One method for this training is to have a number of interviewers simultaneously observing a staged interview and independently recording the responses. After each question, responses can be compared and issues discussed so that interviewers will be using uniform methods of recording responses when conducting interviews.

6. Have each interviewer comment on the survey. Comments about the ease or difficulty of getting responses to each question and suggestions for improving the survey will be extremely useful in designing new surveys. Interviewers should record these comments immediately after each interview or at the end of the last interview of a day if several are conducted back-to-back. However, these comments should never be recorded during an interview. (This would most likely interfere with the interviewer's concentration on the interview.)

7. Inform interviewers of the validation procedure. Validation involves having the school district (or whoever is conducting the survey) call up a portion of each interviewer's respondents to find out how the interview went. This procedure is also a good communica-

tion method with the public and can offer an opportunity for answering questions about the survey. The validation need not threaten interviewers as most comments about the interviews will be favorable and can serve as a basis for complimenting the interviewers when their jobs are completed.

Pre-testing the Survey

As Robert Burns observed, "the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." Pre-testing is an important way to iron out problems before the actual survey. Administering the survey to 20 or more people who are similar to the sample selected is very strongly recommended. While the survey should be as thoroughly developed as possible before pre-testing, pre-testing provides the acid test, "Do people understand the questions and can they make meaningful responses?" Changes made after a pre-test, often simple ones, can avoid wasting time and effort. For example, one school district asked parents to rate the importance of each of Pennsylvania's Ten Goals of Quality Education on a scale (from 1 to 5). A pre-test showed that people generally rated each goal near the very important end of the scale. Since this question didn't differentiate people's opinions about these 10 goals, the question was revised to ask parents to rank order the 10 goals. This should provide more meaningful information about people's opinions.

Analyzing the Results

Survey results may be analyzed and described by the following means:

1. Tabulation of number and percentage of people responding to each part of each question. For example,

Question 29: Do you feel that sex discrimination exists in the schools?

Responses	%	#
YES	30%	120
NO	60%	240
DON'T KNOW	10%	40
TOTALS	100%	400

2. Tabulation of responses for different groups of people (e.g., male and female, School A parents and School B parents). For example,

Question 29: Do you feel that sex discrimination exists in the schools?

Responses	Franklin School	Jefferson Elementary
YES	36%	24%
NO	54%	66%
DON'T KNOW	10%	10%

3. Cross-tabulations of responses for two questions. For example,

Question 3: Are you getting enough information about the schools?

Question 12: Do you feel that the school district central office administration is generally responsive to what parents have to say concerning the schools?

			Question 12 # of Respondents Who Say: YES	NO
		TOTALS	240 (60%)	160 (40%)
Question 3 # of Respondents Who Say:	YES	140 (35%)	100	40
	NO	260 (65%)	140*	120

*These 140 people answered NO to Question 3 and answered YES to Question 12. The other elements in this table can be similarly interpreted.

In our example, the cross-tabulation shows that people answering yes to Question 3 were more likely, than those who answered no, to answer yes to Question 12.

4. Inferences about causal relations may be drawn from any of the tabulations. From the previous examples, these inferences might be drawn:

a) Since Jefferson Elementary has a female principal, people are less likely to feel that sex discrimination exists in the school.

b) People's attitudes about the schools are primarily based on personal experiences. Therefore, if the central office administration makes a point of being responsive to parents or if school-parent communications are improved, parent attitudes about the schools will be more positive in general.

It should be cautioned that inferences are just that. However, some of them may be tested and they can provide the basis for planning future action. For example, a school district could plan an improved school-parent communications program. One evaluation of this improvement and a corroboration of inference (b) above, would be to re-survey a sample of the school district's parents. If the program is successful and the interence is correct, improved school-parent communications will be reflected in more positive attitudes about school administrators, in addition to more positive attitudes about information from the schools.

Reporting the Results

Usually a school district conducting a survey will announce their plans in school newsletters or local newspapers. A general announcement can generate interest in the survey and increase the willingness of people to

participate. Agreeing to release the survey results will usually stimulate participation and is a positive step in improving school-community relations.

Survey results reported by the district usually include a simple tabulation of responses to each question and a summary. If the school board or administration have reviewed the results and have made plans to follow the survey with action in particular areas, these can be mentioned.

Survey results can be used for the attention of specific groups. For example, attitudes about the responsiveness of school building administrators may be publically reported for the district as a whole, but not for particular school buildings. The response to this question for specific buildings is important information for the superintendent but might be harmful if reported to the public. Individual judgements will have to be made for cases like this. A general rule is that the disclosure of information to the community is beneficial and can provide a valid basis for assessing progress made by the school district in certain areas. But reporting information is inadvisable if it reflects the performance of any single individual in the school district. The distinction can be made that the community should have knowledge about program assessments but information about the assessment of individual performance should be given only to those people with a direct need for such information.

Community response to the reporting of the survey results can be useful in developing the format and types of information to be used after conducting future surveys.

Summary

How people feel about a school system and its programs is important information for school board members and administrators. Opinion surveys,

if targeted to ask specific questions of a particular group (or groups), can be an effective means of getting such information. The major concerns in conducting a valid survey are:

(a) to get a representative sample of opinion; and

(b) to obtain unbiased expressions of people's opinions.

Methods exist to facilitate the completion of valid opinion surveys.

Once the survey information is collected it can be reported to various groups in a variety of ways. The survey results can consist of everything from a straightforward tabulation of total responses to each question to a detailed analysis of how different groups (men, women, people under 35 years of age, people with three or more children in school, etc.) responded to particular questions. These results should provide a significant input to future school district decisions. In addition, if surveys are conducted periodically, changes in opinion trends can be tracked over several years.

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